

Yet another failed Howard government experiment in Indigenous affairs?

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In 2004, the Howard government invested considerable public funds to attempt to discredit '[Monitoring practical reconciliation](#)'¹, a paper by Boyd Hunter and myself highlighting that official census statistics raised doubts that 'practical reconciliation' was working.

Compared with the period 1991-96, data for the early Howard years of 1996-2001 indicated that in relative terms Indigenous socioeconomic status—as measured by health, housing, education and employment indicators—was declining. Later this year, we will have 2006 census data that will provide evidence about how the Howard government has fared in its later, perhaps last, years. The 'national emergency' declared yesterday suggests that the Howard government itself is not confident that it has delivered to Indigenous Australians in the period since 2001.

In the meantime the national Indigenous representative organisation, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) has been abolished. According to Minister Brough it is to blame for not fixing the Aboriginal 'problem', even though its functional mandate did not include education or health or mainstream employment, three of the Howard government's four practical reconciliation planks.

The demise of ATSIC, a Senate majority, constitutional powers conferred in 1967, and a record run of budget surpluses have all given the Howard government an unprecedented three-year opportunity to address Indigenous disadvantage unhampered by its imagined barriers of the previous eight years.

It has chosen not to make significant investments in addressing Indigenous backlogs and historical legacy in practical ways, in part because it has focused on the more 'symbolic' issues of mutual obligation, arguing repeatedly that more state intervention will just result in greater problematic dependence.

It has sought moral solace from Noel Pearson's concerns about passive welfare 'poison' on Cape York. Howard's 'neoliberalism' recognises no tension between equality and equity: it is all about assimilation, mainstreaming, integration and normalisation, there is little room for cultural diversity and difference or for engagement with democratically-elected Indigenous voices.

1. CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 254, 'Monitoring 'practical' reconciliation: Evidence from the reconciliation decade, 1991-2001' by J.C. Altman & B. H. Hunter, 2003, available at <http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/discussion.php>.

Indeed, 'culture' is demonised as the source from which so much dysfunction springs forth. Again symbolically it is Sue Gordon, head of the appointed, not elected, National Indigenous Council that will head the government's latest Taskforce, with its full membership still to be announced.

For a government that regularly bleats the mantra of practicality, there is something very knee-jerk, opportunistic and impractical about the latest suite of measures, and little that appears sustainable. For example, will alcohol prohibition for six months on Aboriginal communities merely result in problem drinkers moving to urban centres?

If there is concern about expenditure of welfare dollars on non-food items, why choose to channel only 50% of social security income to food? And what about privately-earned income, will the state also determine how this is spent? Will two types of dollars be issued as a regulatory measure?

If more police are to be placed in Aboriginal communities, from where will they be recruited and will they have requisite cross-cultural capacities to work in communities where English is often spoken as a fourth or fifth language? Where will police be accommodated? And if they are effective, and the outcome is greater Indigenous incarceration for whatever felony, where will Indigenous prisoners that already make up 75% of the NT's crowded prisons be locked up?

Has a link between the permit system and child abuse been demonstrated, or is this just an opportunity to implement ideologically-predetermined vendettas? Will withholding of welfare payments from parents who do not enforce school attendance really help their children's welfare? And so on.

The Pat Anderson/Rex Wild Report *Little Children are Sacred* made many considered recommendations, but starts by stressing that consultation with Indigenous people was the first essential. Among its many observations was a call, yet again, for equitable needs-based funding to address systemic problems that are exacerbating Indigenous anomie in remote communities. Just last week, the admirably independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma was highly critical of the absence of an overarching policy framework in Indigenous affairs and an absence of any monitoring to test if the 'new' arrangements were working, let alone better than earlier arrangements pre-2004, or pre-1996 for that matter.

The Howard government's heavily interventionist and paternalistic 'new' approach, based on a whole six days of policy reinvention (without consultation with the Northern Territory government or Indigenous communities), smacks of political expediency dressed up as moral indignation. Recent history suggests a similar rapid and apparently unsuccessful policy-on-the-run after the opportunistic abolition of ATSIC in April 2004.

While there is much detail still to be provided, there is nothing that seems either empowering or workable about this, the latest of a series of Howard government failed experiments in Indigenous affairs. Indigenous Australians are yet again being subjected to experimental, poorly considered and clearly flawed public policy.